

Analysis of topicality in classroom discourse: topic switch and topic drift in conversations in EFL contexts¹

Análisis de la topicalidad en el discurso del aula: los cambios de tópico brusco y gradual en conversaciones en contextos de inglés como lengua extranjera

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Recibido: 5 de febrero de 2003
Aceptado: 17 de marzo de 2003

ABSTRACT

This study is meant to contribute to the study of topic coherence in interaction: I will examine conversations in English between native English speakers and Spanish speakers in the context of classroom discourse and EFL teaching, and analyse how participants contribute to maintain and change the topic. In particular, topic shift is analysed in two semi-spontaneous conversations where Spanish speakers with different degrees of proficiency in English are involved. The expected outcome is that in the conversation with the lower-level student, there will be (i) a wider range and higher number of strategies used by the native English interlocutor to keep the conversation going; (ii) more drastic clear-cut changes of topic (or switches) and (iii) more topic movement in general. Results prove that this is not the case in (i) and (ii) but the initial hypothesis is validated for (iii). This last finding is corroborated by the quantitative analysis of six more interviews recorded under the same circumstances. Finally, I draw conclusions and suggest possible questions for further research.

KEY WORDS

Topicality.
Topic movement.
Classroom discourse.
English as a foreign language

RESUMEN

Este estudio pretende contribuir al estudio de la coherencia del tópico en la interacción: examinaré conversaciones en inglés entre hablantes nativos de inglés y hablantes de español en el contexto de discurso del aula y enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera, y analizaré cómo los participantes contribuyen a mantener y cambiar de tópico. En concreto, se analiza el movimiento de tópico en dos conversaciones semi-espontáneas donde están implicados hablantes españoles con diferentes niveles de dominio de inglés. El resultado esperado es que en la

PALABRAS CLAVE

Topicalidad.
Movimiento de tópico.
Discurso del aula.
Inglés como lengua extranjera.

¹ This study was funded by the CAM project 06/0027/2001.

conversación con la estudiante de nivel más bajo, habrá (i) una mayor variedad y un número más alto de estrategias usadas por el interlocutor nativo inglés para continuar la conversación; (ii) cambios de tópico más drásticos y claros (o cambios bruscos) y (iii) más movimiento de tópico en general. Los resultados prueban que éste no es el caso en (i) y (ii), pero la hipótesis inicial se valida para (iii). Este último resultado se corrobora con el análisis cuantitativo de otras seis entrevistas grabadas bajo las mismas circunstancias. Finalmente, extraigo conclusiones y sugiero posibles preguntas para investigaciones posteriores.

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1. Introduction

Setting up the frame of discussion necessarily involves an attempt to define the slippery basic concept of 'topic'. The term 'topic' has proved difficult to define. Probably the simplest definition of topic can be given in relation with small units of discourse. According to Schank (1977) in an initial statement, topics are objects or actions in the sentence that are relevant to be responded to according to a set of conversational associational categories. Speakers identify and characterise the elements in the sentence—or rather utterance—in order to orient to the topic (Sacks, 1992a). However, we can also look at topics as bigger units occupying longer stretches of speech than just utterances; in this case we are talking about 'global discourse topics', which represent "a set of main, higher order topics usually hierarchically comprising lower topics" (Van Kuppevelt, 1995: 137) or 'local topics'. In our minds, these are organised in schemata in order to facilitate discourse processing (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

We could say then that in conversations we find general and specific topics, covering the whole conversation or simply one utterance. Moreover, topics are included in one another, organised in a kind of hierarchy of sub-topics inside topics—or local topics inside global ones—. From a cognitive point of view, Chafe (1994) distinguishes between the 'supertopic', which is the semi-active information in the mind of the participants, and the 'subtopics'. These are verbalised depending on whether they are judged as interesting for the listener or not, and they are developed mainly through elicitation or narration. In elicitation, the participant who introduces the topic elicits information and alternates contributions with his/her interlocutor. On the other hand, in narration the topic is self-sustained or "developed by a single speaker with a minimum of assistance" (p. 128).

Besides, topics follow one another in time. After a three-phase structure of opening, development and closing or drifting, a topic gives way to the next and so on, all this constructed cooperatively by the participants in the conversation through turn-taking.

In conversations, topics are shifting all the time. Any response to an initiation of a topic is in fact both staying on topic and drifting from it from the moment it adds something new. Nevertheless, different types of topic movement can be described. Sacks distinguishes

between "stepwise topical movement in which one topic flows into another and *boundaried* topical movement in which the closure of one topic is followed by the initiation of another" (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: 165). In stepwise movement, "any next utterance is built in such a way as to be on topic with a last" (Sacks, 1992b: 300). A stepwise movement then is a local approach concerning the development of a topic whereas boundaried movement concerns the limits between topics. In the development of a topic, there is another type of movement which is less controlled and slower than stepwise movement which is 'topic drift' (Hobbs, 1990; in Downing, 2000).

In spite of an initially apparent opacity, the movements between topics can be traced, as Button and Casey (1984) state in their study of topic-initial elicitors marking the generation of a topic. In fact, participants "mark shifts and closures, and comment on them, as part of the normal coordinating work of conversation" (Myers, 1998: 91). Nevertheless, this movement is constrained by relevance; when responding to a topic, English speakers seem to feel the need to chain to the main idea (Tracy, 1984) or to a certain part of their interlocutor's previous message, as Schank (1977) establishes. In this sense, Halliday (1985) states that topics play a prominent role in linking the utterance to its textual environment.

In this study, by 'topic shift' I understand any distinctive movement from one topic to another, no matter whether this movement is smooth or abrupt. That is, topic shift comprises both topic drift—a smooth movement to a close local topic included in the same global topic—and topic switch—an abrupt movement to a distant and completely unrelated topic: another global topic—. The criteria for distinguishing and classifying topic shifts in this study will be discussed in the next section.

This study ties up with current approaches on Topicality in the sense that, in relation to topics in long stretches of discourse, nowadays the interest has drifted from *what* the topic is about to *how* it is introduced, developed and closed over a stretch of discourse (Downing, 2000). Rather than the topic itself, the movement from one topic to another and the efforts made by participants to keep a topic alive are of interest. As Goutsos (1997: 27) points out, a theory of discourse topic needs to approach the notion of topic from the *how* perspective in order to be successful, given the fact that topics cannot be properly identified by simply paying attention to topics as propositions separate from one another.

In the field of Second/Foreign Language Learning, these latter issues raise straightforward implications for training in communicative skills: for the learner, grasping and managing the linguistic strategies developed by the participants in a conversation in order to state their power—so that their concerns are addressed—, and the abilities to control the topic according to their interests, are as useful as understanding what participants are actually talking about. Conveniently systematised, these strategies and abilities could be taught in ESL/EFL contexts and subsequently applied by the learner to different contexts and topics successfully.

Eventually, the results of this study would contribute to a general framework of study on (i) how participants in conversations manage to get the message across and keep the conversation

going, (ii) what misunderstandings take place between native and non-native speakers in oral exchanges and (iii) how they cope with them.

2. Methodology and materials

2.1. The conversations

The first part of this study consists in the analysis of two conversations held in English by a native English speaker and a Spanish speaker. They both last around 15 minutes and have the same interview-like structure as follows:

- a) In the first part (4 minutes approximately) the Spanish speaker is expected to talk for a while about a topic that she has been previously informed of (they are requested not to make any written notes though). This topic is selected from a list of three which is provided some minutes before the interview; both speakers have chosen the same one, which is about travelling.
- b) Then the native speaker starts to become involved, first by asking questions related to what the other conversant has talked about, later about more general topics. This lasts for about 6 or 7 minutes.
- c) Just before the interview ends the Spanish speaker is asked to look at four pictures which make up a short story. She looks at the pictures and then retells the story.

From the information above we can infer that these are conversations in which the topics are partially controlled by the researcher but which allow for a certain amount of creativity and freedom – maybe with the exception of section (c). On the other hand, participants know their conversation is being recorded and that they are subjects of an investigation, although they do not know what the investigation is about. The outcome is semi-spontaneous conversations comparable to each other.

The native speaker in conversation 1 (C1 henceforth) is a British lecturer (speaker A-C1) and in conversation 2 (C2) it is an American university student (speaker A-C2). They are in charge of keeping the conversation going when the non-native speaker blocks or remains silent so their role is basically to facilitate the participation of the non-native speaker.

The other speakers are both 23-year-old university students whose first language is Spanish and whose second language in proficiency is English. Both of them study English at university but their level of English is completely different. The level of the speaker in conversation number 1 (speaker B-C1) could be rated as low-intermediate and the second non-native speaker's (speaker B-C2) as advanced. The low-intermediate student has never been to an English-speaking country; English and Spanish are the only two languages she speaks. On the other hand, the second Spanish speaker has spent some time in the US and Britain; besides, she is also a fluent speaker of German, Italian and Portuguese.

The study thus resembles the context of an EFL class in which, on the one hand, the teacher normally proposes the topics and facilitates the students' turns and, on the other, students are expected to expand on the topic and contribute to the conversation as much as possible, thus turning the imposed topic into "their" topic. These interviews are believed to be suitable for observing how conversations are maintained and how topics are negotiated in classroom discourse because both speakers have precisely *this* in mind: the interviewer has to help the interviewee go on talking and the interviewee is asked to talk as much as possible. They are both told that they have to keep the conversation going and they presumably make an effort to do so.

As a continuation of the first experiment, six more interviews were selected and analysed in order to corroborate part of the initial findings. The interviews in this second set had been recorded under the same conditions and followed the same pattern as the first ones, except for the fact that 'travelling' was not chosen as the starting topic in all cases. According to the characteristics of these interviews, they can be separated in two groups:

Three interviews parallel C₁ in that the interviewer is also A-C₁ and the profile of the Spanish speakers is very similar to B-C₁ in terms of their lower-intermediate level of English and lack of experience abroad. Besides, they do not speak other languages apart from English and Spanish, except for one of them who can speak French.

The other three interviews resemble C₂ because the interviewer is A-C₂ and all the Spanish speakers have an upper-intermediate or advanced level of English. They all claim to speak at least two more languages and, except for one of them, they have been several times in an English-speaking country.

2.2. Topic movement

The criteria taken into consideration for isolating topic shifts in this study can be divided into three sections: (a) definition of topic opening, (b) techniques for topic closing and (c) the distinction between topic drift and topic switch.

First of all, topics are introduced into conversations following a basic two-part structure: (i) speaker A's initiation—asking for information (eliciting) or providing it (informing), and (ii) speaker B's response—both uptaking or giving permission to continue, (Downing, 2000).

Concerning endings, prior research supports the view that topic-closure is marked by one—or a combination—of these factors: minimal responses, jokes, laughter, pauses and commonplaces like 'you never know' (Myers, 1998). Other linguistic devices identified as signals that the topic is coming to an end are figurative expressions such as 'take something with a pinch of salt' (Drew and Holt, 1998). According to Goutsos (1997: 24), boundaries between topics are marked by explicit devices such as intonation and markers like 'OK', 'well' and 'now'.

In this study, topic-closure is considered to take place when at least one the following situations arise:

Situation 1. The participant who is talking tries to yield the turn repeatedly, and the other one does not take it, thus producing a series of silences. In Maynard's words (1980: 265), "it is in these situations that topic changes regularly appear, as a solution to the problem of producing continuous talk". Pauses such as these can be seen in example (1), the start of the new topic being marked with an arrow:

- (1) Al: yeah, ninety cents a drink and sixty cents a beer you know, heh-heh-heh
 Bob: yeah. I wonder who the guy was who- whose birth [day it was] what's =
 Al: [I don't know]
 Bob: = 's se [cret]
 Al: [did-] uh- I understood that he didn't even go there =
 Bob: heh h=
 Al: = that his sister'd threw it for him, rented the thing, hired the bar
 you know? [heh] so someone's got the bucks heh=
 Bob: [wow] = nice
 sister (1.2)
 Al: yeah (1.0)
 Al: tch th- that'd be really impressive ya' know, just ta rent out a place heh
 (1.0)
 Al: throw a formal party. It- it was kinda fun though
 (3.0)
 Al: yeah
 (1.0)
 → Al: y'ever get into sports cars or anything er?

(adapted from Maynard, 1980: 265)²

Situation 2. Minimal tokens such as 'OK', 'well' and 'so' are characteristic of the previous situation and of closings in general. For them to signal closure, they must constitute a single utterance with a falling intonation contour. These tokens can be considered floor-offering exchanges, and they may be answered by another token of the same sort, thus indicating that none of the speakers has anything to add about the topic (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 303). In our data, we have found that minimal tokens are often repeated, by one speaker in the same utterance or by both participants:

² Maynard acknowledges that this example belongs to West (1978). The transcription guidelines for this example are: (a) square brackets indicate overlapping speech; (b) [-] means that there is no pause between the two utterances; (c) [·] follows truncated words; (d) punctuation signals intonation, [?] being rising pitch, [.] being falling and [.] being level; (e) (1.0) stands for pauses in tenths of second.

(2) <p nt=SP nr=SP002>³

<A> all right so you're . you're sort of pleased with what you're doing you you feel you're happy then at this moment in your life <\A>

 yeah <\B>

<A> mhm <\A>

 mhm <\B>

<A> good |good all right <\A>

 [<laughs> <\B>

<A> you don't you don't miss the Autonoma do you <\A>

 no <\B>

<A> no not really you're <\A>

 no <\B>

<A> mhm <\A>

[.]

→ <A> and do you live near the Autonoma or near the other university <\A>

In (2), after the two acknowledgements ('mhm') not implicative of further talk (Maynard, 1980), speaker A produces a chain of minimal tokens of the type explained above, overlapped by B's laughter—often present in topic boundaries as it has been already stated. Then she tries to generate more topic talk by repeating previous material but, being unsuccessful, after a short pause she introduces a new related topic, signalled with an arrow.

Situation 3. According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), the so-called 'shutting-down technique' appears to be appropriate for certain topics such as 'request-satisfaction' topics, which may be found in our data, mainly in section (c) of the interview. This technique consists in a short exchange like the one underlined below:

- (3) Johnson: ...and uh, uh we're gonna see if we can't uh tie in our plans a little better.
Baldwin: Okay // fine.
Johnson: Alright?
Baldwin: Right.
Johnson: Okay boy,
Baldwin: Okay
Johnson: Bye // bye
Baldwin: G'night.

(Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 307)⁴

³ Examples (2), (4) and (6) come from the UAM Corpus of Spoken English as a Foreign Language.

⁴ Examples (3) and (5) are examples of both topic- and conversation-closure. However, it is possible to find these exchanges as signals of topic-closure only. Schegloff and Sacks state that these techniques are only 'possible pre-closings' of conversations because any of the parties can choose to introduce a new topic and reopen topic-talk after them.

Situation 4. In our data, in which one of the speakers is expected to provide extended talk on the topic, expressions such as 'I don't have anything else to say' or 'what more could I say about this' most probably signal that the topic is coming to an end, especially if combined with other devices seen here. In (4) we can see one of these expressions (underlined) as a signal of topic-closure alongside pauses –marked with dots– and laughter. Once more, the topic shift is arrowed.

- (4) <p nt=SP nr=SP005>
 mhm... well eh... now... my situation is just I'm just expecting my... my final... marks <\B>
 <A> grades <\A>
 which have not eh... appeared yet... but I think I have passed... [so <\B>
 <A> [good
 ... that's a good feeling [<laughs> <\A>
 [<begins laugh> yes I think so <ends laugh>
 ... mm I don't know... what more could I say help me [<laughs> <\B>
 <A> [<laughs>
 → ... well yeah we have a couple of minutes left... em... what do you like best about Madrid
 [<laughs> <\A>

Situation 5. The last situation presented here "involves one party's offering of a proverbial or aphoristic formulation of conventional wisdom which can be heard as the 'moral' or the 'lesson' of the topic being thereby possibly closed" (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 306). These aphorisms can be considered similar to Drew and Holt's 'figurative expressions' mentioned above, which are full clauses "formulaic or relatively fixed in composition syntactically, lexically and sometimes intonationally" (Drew and Holt, 1998: 502). The following is an example:

- (5) Dorrinne: Uh... you know, it's just like bringing the... blood up.
 Theresa: Yeah, well, things uh always work out for the // best
 Dorrinne: Oh certainly. Alright // Tess.
 Theresa: Uh hu.
 Dorrinne: Okay,
 Theresa: G'bye.
 Dorrinne: Goodnight,

(Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 307)

In general, topic boundaries in this study are characterised by a phase of topic-closure presenting one or a combination of the features described in the previous situations, followed by the introduction of a new topic reflecting a clear two-part structure of the type seen above. Nevertheless, there are few instances of perceived topic-opening in which the previous topic-

closure does not seem to fit in with any situation, all of them found in the interviews with A-C2: in these cases, a clear initiation-response pattern in the introduction of the topic is considered enough for signalling topic boundary.

Finally, topic drift can be distinguished from topic switch. Looking at the movement between local topics—that is, drift—Sacks (1992a: 762) suggests that we can see when participants are drifting—and not switching—into 'sub-topics': the new local topic may not be specifically introduced or may require the main topic to be fully present and recoverable. In this study we will consider that there is topic drift when, in the first step of the topic-opening phase—that is, the initiation—, a common main topic is recoverable and a straightforward connection between the 'new' topic and the 'old' one can be traced as in:

- (6) <p nt=SP nr=SPo1o>
 <A> [yeah yes
 there's many of them where I was there it was really nice I liked a lot it's an
 experience I would like to . [have again <laughs> <\A>
 [yeah to repeat <laughs>
 that's very nice . I've been like about five times or so <\B>
 <A> mm <\A>
 yeah <\B>
 <A> nice <\A>
 → mhm and also to Acapulco <\B>

In (6), B introduces the sub-topic 'her visit to Acapulco' (arrowed) as part of the main topic 'past travels', which the participants have already been developing through other sub-topics. The previous one, described as 'an experience [A] would like to have again', is another trip that both conversants have taken. Therefore, the link between the two sub-topics in (6) is that both deal with trips and journeys.

On the other hand, when no common main topic or link can be found there is topic switch. Extract (4) above is an example of topic switch, where the topic 'B's academic life' is not presented as related to B's opinion about Madrid in any direct sense.

3. Research hypothesis and questions

Based on the wide difference between the levels of proficiency in the second language of the Spanish speakers, the following hypothesis about the first part of the experiment can be put forward: it is expected that the way in which the native speakers of English interact with the non-native speakers will be different in the sense that Speaker A-C1 will make use of a wider range of strategies on a more frequent basis for keeping the conversations going or changing of topic than Speaker A-C2. Besides, the changing of topics is expected to be more frequent and abrupt than in C2. This is the case because Speaker B-C1 comprehends and produces English with more difficulty than Speaker B-C2.

To confirm or refute this hypothesis, topic shifts are isolated and analysed to see whether, at the point where the topic is coming to an end on the part of the Spanish speaker, the reaction of the native speaker is: (a) to drop the topic and switch to a completely different one, or (b) to drift to the next sub-topic smoothly; the strategy developed for achieving this is also examined.

4. Qualitative analysis

4.1. Conversation 1

C1 is basically a formal interview where B provides extended turns and A provides backchannelling through continuers as in example (7), thus yielding the turn completely and showing she does not mean to assume speakership (Schegloff, 2000). Often B's turns are very short however, and A does not take over. The effect is that of a 'slow' conversation with little flow of information; for instance, we can easily find strings of very short exchanges of time fillers as in example (8).

- (7) C1
- | | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 64 | <A> | mhm <\A> |
| 65 | | but <\B> |
| 66 | <A> | mhm <\A> |
| 67 | | all these things <\B> |
| 68 | <A> | mhm <\A> |
| 69 | | but no the new part of the . of Paris <\B> |
| 70 | <A> | mhm <\A> |
| 71 | | the old part of Paris <\B> |
| 72 | <A> | mhm I see . you found it fascinating then <\A> |

- (8) C1
- | | | |
|----|-----|--------------------|
| 42 | <A> | mhm <\A> |
| 43 | | and <\B> |
| 44 | <A> | so <\A> |
| 45 | | yes <\B> |
| 46 | <A> | I see . [good <\A> |
| 47 | | [yes |

The role of Speaker A in topic shift very frequently (in all cases except in two) follows a fixed pattern:

- a) Before the actual topic switch or drift takes place, there is a pre-closure phase consisting of a series of mainly minimal responses signalling that there is nothing further to contribute to the topic. Here Speaker A engages in repetitions of previous questions which could be considered topical utterances – as in (9) – or echoes Speaker B's minimal tokens.

(9) C1

- 171 <A> [oh <\A>
 172 [yes <\B>
 173 <A> so you wouldn't like to give up . [no <\A>
 174 [yes <\B>
 175 <A> you just want to go on <\A>
 176 yes <\B>
 177 <A> and that [sort of <\A>
 178 [mhm <\B>
 179 <A> oh I see but are you tired of . studying and going to University and exams and things <\A>

- b) The main strategy used by speaker A in topic initiation is unconstrained direct eliciting. This is also the most effective strategy by far, as after it we get B's longer responses. She commonly asks a direct question or a 'what about' question, usually preceded by fillers such as 'mhm', 'okay', 'good', 'ah', thus allowing herself time to think what to say next, which seems to suggest that the relevance of the closing topic is definitely suspended (Drew and Holt, 1998). For instance, we have (10)-(12).

(10) C1

- 59 <A> mhm good good and ah tell me . what was it that attracted you most <\A>

(11) C1

- 161 <A> good okay and ah . what about ah your plans for the future once you graduate <\A>

(12) C1

- 297 <A> mhm mhm good and ah what about going to the cinema then <\A>

- c) An effective initiation is followed by (a) the interviewee's full answer to the question—longer than the majority of her turns—, (b) some sort of back-channelling and (c) the interviewee stays on topic for one or two more turns, as in (13).

(13) C1

- 268 <A> mhm and which is your favourite group then <\A>
 269 I don't have favourite group <\B>
 270 <A> mhm <\A>
 271 I like this type of music and I like eh . different groups but not I don't have a favourite singer
 272 a favourite group <\B>

4.2. Conversation 2

In general terms, the American speaker's attitude is more informal, closer to her interlocutor than A in C1. In this sense she sounds inviting and receptive. We can see this comparing (14) from C2 and (15) from C1.

(14) C2

9 <A> go ahead talk to me <\A>

(15) C1

5 <A> so ok Sonia . so see you know I'd like to have an informal chat with you .
about things that

6 you might find of interest and ah so in order to get started I'd like you to tell
me the topic

7 you've chosen <\A>

In addition, she contributes to the building of the topic by furnishing her interlocutor with personal information and opinion, as in (16). This means that she does not stick to the requested role which implied participating only when the conversation got stuck.

(16) C2

222 <A> [*<laughs>*]

223 yeah it's always good when you can actually really watch your

224 read= or what you're seeing <\A>

225 mhm <\B>

226 <A> so . that definitely makes a difference <\A>

227 mhm <\B>

228 <A> I've read ah some Spanish books and . that's why I'm here I kind of wanna
go and find

229 those places that I read about in the books find out the feeling <\A>

From these data we can draw that the relationship established between them is cheerful and the atmosphere is relaxed. In short, the exchange of information takes place fluently and springs from both sides, thus resembling fluent spontaneous conversation between peers.

Having said all this, and turning to the role of the interviewer in topic shift, it is not surprising that we cannot trace a clear repetitive pattern in the way speaker A-C2 introduces new topics and sub-topics, so we lack a recurrent initiation-response model. Three aspects characterise her contributions in this respect:

- a) She does not necessarily wait until the topic is exhausted to get started on new topics or sub-topics; for example, in extract (17) the arrow signals a clear topic switch in the turn where A suddenly introduces the topic 'travelling to the US'. Henceforth they stay on that topic and drop the previous one, 'favourite food'.

(17) C2

- 91 and have you heard about a place . well I don't know if you've been to the States but
 92 there's a place called Olive Garden <\B>
 93 <A> mhm <\A>
 94 <sighs> my favourite . if I go well I would live there in all . in the restaurant I mean <\B>
 → 95 <A> I'm from the United States [<laughs> <\A>
 96 [ah . which part <\B>
 97 <A> I'm from New York <\A>
 98 ah <\B>
 99 <A> [yeah <\A>
 100 [I went there . twice <\B>
 101 <A> yeah where <\A>
 102 eh I went to . to New York city <\B>

- b) At the first signal that the topic is coming to an end, she initiates another topic. The phases of pre-closure and closure of topics are considerably shorter than in C1, as we can see in (18).

(18) C2

- 47 and though was . sad because . when I went to the States like . I I met lots of people and .
 48 you know . still I'm still in touch with some of them so . it's sad . and what else can I say
 49 about . these two countries <\B>
 50 <A> how long were you in the United States for <\A>

- c) Rather than topic switches like the one in example 17, smooth movements such as topic drifts are preferred by speaker A; also by speaker B, who is also deeply engaged in topic movement, as will be shown below.

5. Quantitative analysis

In order to account for the possible differences between the two conversations in the organisation and development of topics, topic boundaries were isolated, classified as topic switches or drifts following the criteria presented in section 2 above, and compared among them. Table (1) represents the occurrence of topic-shift in C1 and C2, addressing the following parameters: (i) division into topic switches and topic drifts and (ii) the speaker who introduces the shift, either the native English speaker or the Spanish speaker.

Table 1: topic shift in conversations 1 and 2.

	a. topic switch			b. topic drift			c. shifts: a + b		
	B's		total	B's		total	NNS's		total
	total	%		total	%		total	%	
C1	4	1	25%	12	0	—	16	1	6%
C2	3	1	33%	8	6	75%	11	7	63%

C1 presents more topic movement, and the majority of topics are introduced by speaker A. This seems to indicate that topics come to an end relatively easily and that it is the native English speaker who takes the lead in the conversation and elicits information as a proper interviewer. Besides, we can see more drifts than switches, drifts being preferred in 75% of the cases.

In C2 the most striking piece of data is that both speakers alike provide topics: they equally contribute to the building of topicality. In fact Speaker B-C2 surpasses speaker A-C2 in the total sum (considering drifting and switching together). The Spanish speaker is mainly the speaker who drifts from one sub-topic to the next one, although she also plays a role in topic switching. In this sense C2 radically differs from C1. However, in line with the results in C1, the number of topic drifts is higher than the number of topic switches, in a similar proportion to that in C1.

Nevertheless, although the distribution of drifts and switches is similar in both conversations, it is worth noticing that in C1 there is a higher total number of topic shifts, in spite of the fact that both conversations last approximately the same time.

This last result could suggest that, in conversations between native and non-native speakers of English, the non-native speaker's competence in English may have an effect on topic movement. The need to explore this aspect further leads us to the analysis of the second set of interviews which, as has been explained, can be divided into (a) three interviews between A-C1 and three lower-intermediate students and (b) three interviews whose participants are A-C2 and students with an upper-intermediate or advanced level of English.

The identification of topic boundaries in these interviews reveals that the overall amount of topic movement in the conversations with lower-intermediate students is consistently higher than in the conversations with more advanced students. The average number of topic shifts per group is 17 for the interviews in the first group and 11 for the interviews in the second, thus corroborating this part of the results of conversations 1 and 2.

6. Conclusions

The hypothesis formulated in section three of this study has proved to be partially wrong. It is true that in C1 we found more instances of topic switch and drift on the part of speaker A, who

clearly makes an effort to keep the conversation going. However, in spite of the larger amount of data, this speaker does not make use of more strategies than A-C2. She rather repeats the recurrent pattern shown in section 4.1. This could be due to the fact that, in an attempt to help the non-native speaker comprehend her message, she turns to simple repetitive structures that may have proved effective with low-level students in the past.

In C2 we have found a wider variety of patterns in whose development the Spanish speaker is deeply involved. In this respect, two variables may have influenced the results: (i) the fact that the participants in C2 are both students may have prompted a peer relationship between them even though they did not know each other beforehand; (ii) because of the low level of English of speaker B-C1, the relaxed atmosphere of C2 cannot be found in C1; that is, C1 may be repetitive because in order to communicate only a few basic structures are used.

A possible factor explaining the different results in C1 and C2 is that these conversations were designed as interviews in which the non-native interviewee was asked to participate as much as possible. The results in C1 may be affected by the fact that the interviewee experienced difficulties in giving longer answers to the interviewer's questions due to her low level of English. According to the data in this study, both the first two conversations and the second set of interviews, the level of proficiency of the non-native speaker seems to have an effect on topic movement, more specifically on the occurrence of topic shift.

The interview-like format of these conversations and the fact that the interviewers participating in them follow clear instructions, guarantee their similarity and consequently, make their comparison possible. However, it could be interesting to have another study involving spontaneous conversations that can, at the same time, be compared in these terms. Besides, further research could analyse the strategies that *the same* native speaker uses for addressing non-native speakers with different degrees of proficiency in the foreign language.

More research could also cast light on the reason why, in conversations 1 and 2, the majority of the changes taking place are smooth drifts rather than switches, so that drifts seem to pervade over switches in this context. Besides, there is no significant difference between the conversations in that respect; this apparently clashes with the initial hypothesis that switches were expected to be more frequent in C1. Further analysis of other aspects present in the conversations such as prosodic and non-linguistic features in topic movement could prove relevant in a more thorough classification of the different strategies used by the participants.

7. References

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